



Taking the Stress Out of Holiday Hosting

Simplify, Simplify, Simplify!

Way back in July you eagerly volunteered to host Christmas dinner for 20. Now it's December, and you're peppered daily by images of storybook holiday gatherings. If you were born with the Martha Stewart holiday gene – the one that enables you to create prize-winning Halloween costumes out of fabric scraps and whip up a Thanksgiving feast without breaking a sweat – then you may be unperturbed.

But if you're less domestically inclined, you may be starting to feel stressed. Instead, take a deep breath, make a plan, and then simplify, simplify, simplify! Here's how:

Plan & Prioritize

Go ahead. Make a list that includes everything you'd do if you were planning the penultimate family gathering. But then edit it, ruthlessly! Use a highlighter on the non-negotiable items, and cross off the things you simply won't have time or energy to do. When deciding what to cross off, consider your budget as well.

When planning your menu:

- Keep it simple. You don't need a dozen hors d'oeuvres or side dishes.
- Decide what you really want to prepare, choosing only dishes you look forward to making, and review any recipes you'll be using to make sure they're not too complex.
- Decide what you'll buy, and what you'll ask others to bring.

Put all the tasks you need to accomplish on a calendar – especially shopping trips and cleaning – to make sure you allow enough time to do everything.

Say “Yes” to Help

It's no big deal for guests to bring a bottle of wine, a side dish or a dessert – in fact most people feel uncomfortable arriving empty-handed. Say yes to offers to pitch in, and make a note on your master list to avoid duplication of efforts. You may find your to-do list quickly cut in half when you let your guests help out.

Say “No” to Perfection

Are you really going to bake four apple pies from scratch? Buy new hand towels for the bathroom? Insist that every man, woman and child has a matching fork? Relax! Your guests are coming (one would hope) to enjoy the company of family and friends, not to scrutinize your cooking and cleaning.

(If you have guests who do tend to criticize, keeping things intentionally low-key is far less stressful than trying to live up to unrealistic standards to impress a petty or mean-spirited relative.)

Run, Walk or Bike

Making time for exercise in the weeks leading up to the holidays will help you clear your head and release stress (and keep tasty holiday treats from expanding your waistline). It can also enhance your mood and your sleep.

Enjoy Yourself!

Even if you do everything you can to plan ahead and minimize stress, guess what? You just might forget an important ingredient on your big shopping trip, or the potatoes may be undercooked, or your mother-in-law will complain that the turkey is dry. Something is bound to be less than perfect, but that's okay. Instead of trying to monitor the festivities to make sure everything's just right for everyone else, relax and enjoy yourself. Catch up with out-of-town guests, have a good laugh with friends, and watch your kids revel in pumpkin pie.

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